

# Do What is Important

James L. Flowers<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Dr. James L. Flowers presented the 2014 AAAE Distinguished Lecture at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Agricultural Education in Salt Lake City, Utah in May, 2014. The article is a philosophical work based upon the author's experiences in the agricultural education profession.*

When Donna Graham<sup>2</sup> asked me to deliver the Distinguished Lecture at this year's AAAE Conference, I was honored, but somewhat overwhelmed by the fact that I would be considered for this type of recognition. Having seen over 30 of these presentations over the years, I certainly did not see myself in the same category as those who have presented this lecture in the past. I am humbled and honored to have the privilege of serving as the Distinguished Lecturer this year.

Once you get past the shock and excitement of being selected as the speaker, the next thought is "What will I say?" I have always been in the role of the audience – one who tried to soak up the wisdom that came from the Distinguished Lecturers of the past. I had never given a great deal of thought to what I would say if I were asked to speak. Like so many of those who have preceded me in this role, I looked over the speeches of several of the previous speakers (one certainly wouldn't want to repeat a similar message). That was another intimidating task, because I came away with the feeling that almost everything that needs to be said had already been said.

One thing that struck me as I looked at the list of previous Distinguished Lecturers from the time when I entered the profession was that I had the honor of knowing some pretty awesome people in the "agricultural education" profession over the years – people that many of the younger members of our profession may not have had the opportunity to get to know if they did not happen to be at a particular university. When you think about having the opportunity to interact with Bob Warmbrod, David Williams, Lloyd Phipps, Floyd McCormick, Edgar Persons, Sam Curtis, Bob Terry, and Herman Brown, just to name a few, I realized that I have had the opportunity to walk among some of the giants in our profession that so many of our younger members may have missed. And I won't begin to list those who continue their work in the profession that have influenced my career because I would leave someone out that really should have been included. Now, I humbly stand here today on the shoulders of those giants of the past and many who are present in this room who have shaped our profession.

Each of those that I have mentioned left a legacy because of their excellence in some area of their profession. What made those individuals great at what they did for so many years? I believe they had planned for excellence throughout their careers. So, part of this lecture is really focused on our younger members in AAAE. Those of you that have been around for several years can just reflect on whether my advice to the next generation really makes any sense. I will also include in my comments what I believe we need to work on to improve what I believe is an excellent profession.

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If excellence is your goal, let me begin by saying that talent alone is not enough! Talent is important, but not sufficient. I believe that excellence in anything that we do is a reflection of the value or importance that we place on the activity—or, for those who like educational theory, our performance is grounded in Expectancy Theory. Vroom (1964) explained expectancy theory as a theory of motivation. Our motivation is based upon three things: (1) our desire to be excellent in a given area, (2) our belief that our effort will result in the excellence we desire, and (3) the amount of effort we are willing to expend to achieve that excellence. All three have to be present to achieve the motivation that results in the excellence that sets you apart from your peers. Desire alone is not enough. We have all known individuals who wanted to achieve greatness but either did not believe they were capable of greatness or were not willing to expend the effort required for greatness. Perhaps you also know people who are capable of great things, but lack the desire or the effort it takes to achieve them. Those who have become giants in our profession have the entire package of talent, desire, belief in themselves, and willingness to put forth the effort needed to become those icons in agricultural education.

As long as the talent and motivation is present, and there is no doubt that there is an abundance of talent present in this profession, I have to believe that you will be excellent in the things that are important to you. I also believe that planning is important. We have to plan for excellence in our lives. I have always described this planning as “living on purpose.” I believe that excellence is intentional, not accidental. We all know that we have a much better chance of getting where we want to be if we decide where that destination might be before we set out. So, it is vitally important that you decide what is important to you—what you value. This will be different for each of us. I cannot tell you what you should value – that is a decision that each individual has to make for themselves. But once you determine what is most important to you, you are well on your way to applying the talent and motivation that is within you toward achieving the excellence you desire.

I want to spend a few minutes telling you what is important to me and how these things influenced my professional career. I will not say that I have achieved everything that I had wanted to achieve in these areas because I am definitely still a “work in progress.” But I can tell you what I am trying to achieve. Someday, I will hope to look back on the years and say that I did some of the things that were important to me fairly well. Of course, it is up to you to decide what your individual priorities might be.

I decided a long time ago what was important to me – F.F.A. No, I am not speaking of the youth organization that gave a number of us so many opportunities as young people to grow and develop. I am talking about another F.F.A. I do owe a lot to that organization, but it is only a part of what is important to me as a person. Instead, I want to tell you about the F.F.A. that is important to me. They have served me well, and I would recommend them to you. I believe that those letters represent why I am standing in front of you today.

The first F is for FAITH. Faith is important to me because it underlies everything that I do. I will not spend a lot of time on this attribute, even though I believe it is the most important aspect of my life, because I don’t intend to preach a sermon today. Faith is my belief in the higher power that governs my actions as a human being. It is because of my faith that I behave the way that I do in all aspects of my life. Faith is not simply a belief. It requires action. The Heroes of Faith described in that great “faith chapter” in the Bible, Hebrews 11, had the quality of faith attributed to them because of what they did, not just because of what they believed. Because of faith they did something (Hebrews 11. The Holy Bible, New King James Version). Faith does play a strong role in my professional life. Faith underlies the qualities of fairness in the way I try to treat people, in honesty in my dealings with those with whom I come in contact, with trustworthiness that I try to exhibit to those who depend upon me. I believe that this is what is expected of me by that higher power, so my faith is shown by the way I act. If nothing else can be said about me as I leave this profession, I hope that it can be said that Jim Flowers had those qualities of fairness, honesty, and trustworthiness. I have had a lot of great examples of people in

this profession that I can describe that way, but I can tell you that one of the people that I looked up to in this regard was one of the people I listed among the giants of the profession. That was Bob Terry. I believe that those of you who have known him would understand why I chose him as my example. I hope that each of you has someone in mind that has set that same example for you. They may be in this very room today. You have a lot of people in the profession from which to choose.

The second F in FFA is for FAMILY. I feel fortunate to come from a very traditional family that is very close. As I have grown older, I have come to realize just how important those family relationships have been to me and how they have molded me into the person that I am today. Having the family that I have had over the years has given me that anchor that I needed for both the good times and times when I was challenged. A desire to do the best for my family has also motivated me professionally. I know that many of you share those same family priorities that I have. I see your postings of family activities on Facebook and enjoy the conversations that we have in the hallways and during breaks about your family activities. Families can provide a foundation for your life and the support for what you do professionally – whether it is a very traditional family, an extended family, or possibly what some of us might call more distant family connections. There is no doubt that the second part of my life centers around my family members. I feel very fortunate to have the family that I have today—and take a great deal of pride and joy in talking about them to my friends and colleagues, especially my seven grandchildren.

My advice to the younger members of the profession is to consider your families as you make those decisions that lead to excellence in life and your profession. We all know what the research says – that faculty spend a lot of time in their professional lives and that there is a struggle for many of us in maintaining a balance between our family and our professional obligations. And there are times when the professional obligations have to be met, and, for a short period of time, may have to be a top priority. But make sure that you also set aside those times where family is the top priority. Sometimes, it is ok to tell someone that you cannot make a particular meeting because you have family obligations.

In recent years, I have seen our profession become a little more aware of the need to balance family and professional lives. I hope this continues with the opportunities for more flexible schedules, extensions of promotion and tenure “clocks”, and other options for faculty that emphasize that university administration understands that families are important.

The A in FFA is for AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION – in its broadest sense. By that, I mean that it includes formal classroom instruction in agriculture, nonformal instruction and outreach to agricultural clientele groups, providing information on agricultural topics to people in the industry as well as the general public, and those involved in providing leadership for this great agricultural industry. I possibly could have just made this A simply AGRICULTURE, but I doubt that I would have enough time today to discuss why this broad field of agriculture is so important to me. So, I will keep my comments centered around agricultural education.

Perhaps like many in this room, a lot of the reasons that I am here today speaking to you is because of the agricultural education program that I experienced as a youth. As Donna said in the introduction, I was a 4-H member and later was a student in a high school agricultural education program who was a FFA member. I grew up in a very agricultural community. I knew very early in high school that I wanted to become an agriculture teacher. I believe that I made the right choice for me. I had the wonderful opportunity to teach agriculture to high school students for 10 years. The experiences that I had as a high school agriculture teacher taught me so much and provided me with so many of the examples and illustrations that I have used in classes over the years. To say that I have enjoyed my 28 years at NC State University would be an understatement. I love my job and the truly outstanding faculty with whom I have the privilege of working every day.

So third on my priority list is my career. While it is third, it is still very important to me. It is also our careers that give us the opportunity to impact the most people and to truly make a difference in their lives. We have a great profession – one that has impacted the lives of thousands of students and countless numbers of people around the world. We should never discount the impact that we may have on generations that will follow us.

I will not attempt to provide advice to this group on faith and family. Those are personal issues for each of you. But I do want to spend a few minutes today on what I feel is important that we focus on within our profession. For the sake of time, I will keep my comments on the three major missions of our universities—teaching, research, and outreach or service.

With regard to teaching, we have challenges that we have not faced before – at least not at the present levels. Enrollments in many of our programs are not adequate to meet the needs of the profession. The students who are entering our programs have a different demographic makeup as far as agricultural experience is concerned. And the expectations of Generations X, Y, Z, or whatever the descriptor we use, are certainly a challenge for us who came from a much more traditional background. Our profession will have to adapt to that changing demographic at the same time as we work to maintain the traditional values in our profession that we believe are most important. This is not a bad thing! We are fortunate to have extremely talented students in our programs. These students will help move us forward as a profession, but like any teaching situation, our job will be to identify what is good change and to facilitate that change to benefit our programs and our students.

We do have a major challenge facing our profession – one that we don't seem to have answers for at this time. I am very concerned about the lack of diversity in our profession. While I am certainly not the first to raise this concern, I believe we may have reached the point where this has become critical. I am not just referring to the lack of diversity at the university level. The problem exists at every level in agricultural education and in every facet of our discipline. I wish I could believe that 30 years from now, the Distinguished Lecturer will be looking at an audience that is much more diverse than the one I am facing. Perhaps they will. Thirty years ago, the Distinguished Lecturer saw only a very small handful of women in his audience. We were able to make a great deal of progress with regard to gender, but I am afraid that the other underrepresented populations present us with much greater challenges than increasing the number of women in agricultural education has presented. We need to make as much progress with underrepresented populations in agricultural education as we have made with including women. It will not be easy, but we have to find ways to attract all people into our profession of agricultural education.

Another challenge facing us is the changing way that we deliver agricultural education programs. Our students are choosing distance education delivery of courses in rapidly increasing numbers when that option is presented. Our challenge is insuring that the quality of the education that we deliver via distance is equal to that of in-class instruction. We must not sacrifice quality of instruction for convenience. Our experience has been that, for many courses, we can maintain the quality of instruction using distance education technologies. But there is no doubt that course development takes a great deal of time and effort. And distance education students demand a lot more faculty time while they are enrolled. If we are to meet the demand for online courses and also serve a population that previously have not had access to agricultural education programs, I believe we have to do much more sharing of courses among our universities. There seems to be very little logic in every department putting forth the effort to develop and deliver the same distance education courses to a relatively small number of students enrolled in our degree programs. I believe in the talented faculty at other universities and think that our students would benefit from what they have to offer. We have to find ways to share the talents we have in our profession. We have started to do this, but much more can be done.

As someone who has attended research conferences for over 30 years, I have to say that the quality of our research methodology has improved over those years. I will also attest that this was at times painful to the faculty--certainly including me. But we are better at conducting research because of it. I am also pleased that I see agricultural educators being included in major multidisciplinary grants because other faculty at our universities have recognized our value in the curriculum, dissemination, or evaluation components of the projects. I expect this to continue in the future, but we have to promote our expertise to others in agricultural disciplines to make this happen.

But, I have also noticed a tendency for our research to have a major focus on our university students and our programs, rather than the people who are out “in the trenches” working in agricultural education who need answers to the pressing questions that face them every day. It is not that our students and programs are not important. They are. And we should be doing some of this type of research. We cannot forget the people in the trenches in our quest to collaborate on that multidisciplinary grant that might bring millions of dollars to our university or to conduct research with the easily accessible groups within our universities. Our researcher resources are limited when you consider the size of our profession, compared to other agricultural disciplines. If we do not address those problems facing the grassroots of our profession, no one else will. I want to challenge us to work on those issues and provide some of the answers that are so badly needed by our constituents.

I am very proud of the “service orientation” of our profession. Agricultural educators certainly have a service mentality. We want to continue that tradition, and we should want to continue our service throughout our professional careers. While those of us who have served in leadership roles in our professional organizations certainly want to provide opportunities to the younger members, we need to continue to find important roles of service after we have finished our terms of office. We have some great examples of members who have done just that.

As for our extension and outreach activities, we cannot underestimate the importance of this type of activity to our communities, our states, and to those in developing countries. Perhaps this is where we have the opportunity to make the greatest impact. I have seen an increase in these types of activities over the years. But let me encourage you to think more in terms of extension and outreach programs than of activities. We can stay busy with activities that may, in themselves, be good activities. But if they are isolated activities, the impact is often minimal. But we have the potential to make a much greater impact on those groups we are trying to serve if we develop programs that will address their needs. If we put together a series of outreach activities in a programmatic way, we have the potential to really make a difference in the lives of people. Because our time is limited, we have to select the programs that are most needed and plan them in such a way as to maximize their potential for success.

Those are some of my thoughts. I have no doubt that this profession will continue in the traditions of excellence we have seen in the past. There is much to do. No one person can do everything. But I am convinced that together we can accomplish great things. But, the first thing to do is to determine what is most important to you. I can't wait to see what you will accomplish. As for me, I still have some work to do on FFA.

### References

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